Online Reputation Management

Online reputation management (ORM) refers to activities undertaken online to create or maintain a positive perception of a country, destination, brand, business or person. It involves monitoring and controlling online conversations about the entity whose reputation is to be established, defended or repaired. In essence, it is about actively managing the digital footprint of the entity and the impressions an audience might derive from it. It can also include the removal of personal information (e.g., to avoid identity theft or harassment) and the protection of brands from being taken over or misused by third parties. Within the marketing mix, it falls under public relations but has established its own strategies and tools.

Online reputations are overall perceptions based on information available online. This information includes search results, images, videos, reviews and ratings, social media profiles and mentions, descriptions in discussion forums, blogs or websites, and any online news articles. Online reputations are based on paid, earned, shared and owned content.

What matters in determining the online reputation is not only the sentiment strength and valence of the content but also its general visibility, discoverability and spread, and any topics or other persons/businesses the content is associated with (especially through tagging and hashtagging). Besides images and videos, content like negative reviews, hate sites (e.g., the ‘I hate United Airlines’ Facebook page), influencer posts and negative online media coverage
are critical as they not only rank high in search engine results but can be shared easily and, thus, have the potential to spread fast and wide. Most importantly, online content is persistent, which means that it has long-term effects on an online reputation.

The shift towards online conversations, initially powered by websites followed by the increasing availability and use of social media, has multiplied and diversified the voices that shape a reputation. This leaves individual entities less in control of how they are represented online (Bunting and Lipski, 2000). Due to the public and sometimes viral nature of online information, concerns regarding online representations no longer just apply to public entities but also private persons.

Since the online reputation can and is often created by others, one does not have to be an active Internet user to have an online reputation. At the same time, online platforms and digital tools have increased the reputation-building potential, especially for those entities that do not have access to or cannot afford traditional public relations campaigns. However, individuals and businesses are often not aware of the tools and strategies available or do not have the knowledge and/or resources to implement them. In recognition of the lack of awareness and difficulty of implementation, some destination management organizations (e.g., Destination British Columbia) have started to offer training for their tourism operators to help them understand the importance of ORM.

ORM is a strategy that encompasses the creation and spread of positive content and the removal or dismissal of content that shines a negative light on the entity’s reputation. Positive efforts can include the establishment and optimization of elaborate social media profiles, the publishing of content on high-traffic and reputable websites, the creation of new content to provide factual information, the elicitation of positive reviews or recommendations/testimonials from others, increasing social media activity, and search engine optimization strategies that make already existing content more visible.

Activities aimed at reducing negative threats to the online reputation include removing content, creating content to push unwanted content down in search results, responding to negative reviews, contacting sources to edit or remove negative content, or launching a public relations campaign to issue an apology, address concerns or redirect attention. ORM can also involve filing a formal complaint with a webmaster, search engine or platform if content is inaccurate, defamatory, against a law or against use policies. The table summarizes these strategies.

Both online reputation enhancement and repair strategies must be judged against what is legal, what is in line with online provider and platform policies, and what is ethical. For example, certain search engine strategies are penalized by search engines if discovered. Or, paying for fake positive reviews to boost one’s online reputation is not only against the use policies of review platforms but is also highly unethical. Specialized ORM agencies can help navigate the progressively complex ORM space.

ORM has become increasingly important as more individuals and organizations form their opinions and base their decisions on content they find online. The world has essentially transformed into a reputation economy where one’s online reputation has become one of the most important assets (Fertik and Thompson, 2015). This means that online reputations have an economic value and that economic gains can be derived from them. In contrast, when not carefully managed, online reputations can deteriorate and lead to economic losses. The reputation economy is especially prominent in tourism, which involves high risks, information asymmetries, fierce competition and limited opportunities to build and communicate trust without the help of websites, social media or mobile applications.

With the advent of the Internet, and especially after the emergence of social media, transparency in tourism markets has increased to an extent where ORM has become instrumental for the survival of most destinations, companies and brands. Given the significance of online reviews in tourism (see the entry ‘Online Reviews’ in this Encyclopedia), effectively monitoring and responding to reviews has become a central tenet of ORM for most tourism businesses (Zhang et al., 2020). Carefully monitoring social media sentiment is also an important ORM strategy in tourism (Leung et al., 2013). Social media activism (Gretzel, 2017), anti-tourism sentiment (see the entry ‘Anti-tourism’ in this Encyclopedia) and recent ‘cancel culture’ have made tourism extremely vulnerable to boycotts, thus further increasing the need for proactive ORM.

ORM is also important for tourists. Many tourism businesses now offer preferential treatment (e.g., discounts or faster customer service...
responses) to tourists with extremely positive and prominent online reputations. Maintaining a favourable online reputation is particularly important in the context of the sharing economy, where both hosts and guests are judged based on their profiles (Ert, Fleischer and Magen, 2016) and the reviews received from others. A negative online reputation in this case can mean no interest in their offerings for hosts and a refusal of service for guests.

In fact, online reputations have become so important that some individuals, so-called social media influencers, can make a living from letting brands associate themselves with their online personas in the context of influencer marketing (Gretzel, 2018), or in relation to more long-term brand ambassadorships. ORM is a core activity for influencers and involves creating frequent and high-impact content that is not only very visible but also elicits a large number of positive reactions. They further build their reputations by associating themselves with particular topics, curating followers, maintaining a particular image with their audiences, and paying agencies to promote them. Influencers increasingly scrutinize the brands they associate with so as not to endanger their online reputation. Tourism destinations and brands often elicit the help of influencers to boost their own reputations, with Saudi Arabia being a recent example.

Maintaining a favourable online reputation is extremely difficult for tourism destinations because of their complexity, their reliance on the reputations of local businesses, the massive amount of content available online that affects their reputation, and the large number of internal and external stakeholders that could challenge their reputation at any given time. While destinations are well versed in handling traditional public relations tasks, they often struggle to effectively conduct ORM due to lack of knowledge and resources or conflicting mandates. Some destinations have started to encourage residents to help them enhance and defend the destination’s online reputation.

A neglected stakeholder group in the context of ORM in tourism is employees. They are often instrumental in shaping the online reputation of their employer, but many businesses do not have policies in place to manage the information employees can post. In terms of reputation enhancement, tourism employees are often underused as advocates for their employers. Online reputations are also

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consequential for hiring and firing, with many employers looking at a job applicant’s online reputation before making a hiring decision or letting an employee go because their online reputation would reflect badly on the company. Maintaining a professional online reputation has therefore become an important aspect of building a career, including in tourism and hospitality.

The importance of actively managing one’s online reputation also applies to tourism researchers. Not only hiring and firing but also promotion and funding decisions are nowadays influenced by the online reputation a tourism researcher has built. This includes maintaining profiles on academic platforms, such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate, or publishing content on a personal website or blog. Websites that allow students to rate professors also influence the online reputations of these tourism academics.

The British TV series Black Mirror paints a bleak picture of a future in which online reputations determine all aspects of a professional or personal life and are essentially inescapable. Together with mounting identity theft and privacy concerns as well as increasing accountability and transparency demands on businesses, attempts to protect online reputations, or demands to at least make them more manageable, are rising. As a result, legislation like the ‘right to be forgotten’ established in the European Union is gaining in relevance. There is also increasing pressure on social media platforms and mobile applications to help their individual and business users manage their reputations. Collective actions against platforms like TripAdvisor to ensure that false reviews can be removed are evidence of the growing importance of online reputations and the need to regulate the online conversation space. With advances in technologies through artificial intelligence applications, new opportunities but also challenges for ORM will surely emerge.

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References